

Purity, Kindness and the Value of Law

Texts: St. Mark 1:40-45; II Kings 5:1-14

When God gave the Law to the Israelites through Moses on Mount Sinai, he did so in order to make men and women holy. For after the Exodus, as soon as they arrive at Mount Sinai, God explains the whole point of delivering them out of Egypt. He has brought them to Sinai on eagle's wings so that they might be his own possession out of all the nations of the earth. But that means that they are to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In order that they might indeed become so, he therefore gives them the Law, for it is the point of the Law to teach them what is good. Thomas Aquinas in the middle ages explained it simply: "The chief intention of the Divine Law is to establish human beings in friendship with God...Now there cannot possibly be any friendship of humans to God who is supremely good unless humans become good... Therefore it was necessary for the Law to include precepts about virtue."

But if the point of the Law was to teach morality, the Law is something more than just morality, at least insofar as that means just following the rules. As the ancient Israelites, and even Jews today understand it, keeping the Law also involves a sense of purity. To keep the Law was to be different than the Gentiles; it was to be a people apart. It was to be clean. As the psalmist says: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart and does not lift up his soul to what is false." To keep the Law was to be moral, but it was also to keep clean and pure, and a good deal of the Law as found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy has much to say about purity. Touching dead things, touching sick things such as lepers, eating with Gentiles and especially their meat which had been sacrificed to filthy idols, and even touching women at certain times of the month was enough to make one unclean and impure. Should one ever contract impurity, though, at least the Law had numerous

prescriptions by which one could be made clean.

Although it is often trivialized, the notion of purity is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a very important matter. What seems to underlie it is a very positive sense of innocent beauty and wholeness, a sense that even we today do not have a hard time understanding. We can, for example, look out at a landscape and find it beautiful. All the parts are in order and a whole. We ourselves in looking out at it feel uplifted and somehow cleansed. Should, however, a corporation come in and do strip mining there, we all would undoubtedly say that the place had been sullied and its purity and integrity lost. Similarly, there are people we admire who not only do good but do it in such a way that we find something about them and their actions beautiful. Should they ever err and fall from grace, we cannot help but see them as sullied, and think that something good and pure has been taken away from them. It was thus that the ancient church used to talk about the stain of sin, since it took away the beauty of the human soul. Purity also carries a sense of wholeness and integrity, a sense that one is not playing both sides of the fence, limping with two opinions, or doing any hypocritical back door dealings.

The notion of purity, however, can have an unfortunate side. When, for example, purity and separateness and fear of contagion from the impure ever becomes an end in itself, we become less than holy and good. After all, clean hands don't always mean a good heart. Just think about Pontius Pilate. Often clean hands are simply hands that we think are too good to get dirty. In this way, if it was at all a positive thing that the ancient Israelites maintained a standard of purity, at the same time, it also caused them to regard the Gentiles, the sick, and even women as somehow impure and not to be touched. We often have a similar unfortunate sense. We are afraid of any sort of contact with homosexuals, people with AIDS, retarded people, and even people of a different color, as if we would instantly become homosexuals, get AIDS, mental

retardation or turn colors if we shook hands with these people. Since germs have nothing to do with any of these things, we must somehow think the contagion is moral and that we will catch it by contact with them.

Now, it is because we are like that, and because the ancient Jews were like that, that the story of Jesus healing the leper is such an astounding story. Jesus certainly was not the first one ever to cure a leper. II Kings tells the story of how Elisha cured Naaman. In doing so, Elisha did the leper an obvious favor in healing him of a dread disease and thereby reintegrating him into human life, for lepers were not allowed anywhere near healthy people. They simply wandered the countryside, required to ring bells that let everybody know that they were coming so that others might get out of the way. So Elisha did do a favor for Naaman. But whereas Elisha simply told Naaman to go and wash, and he would be clean, Jesus *touch*ed his leper.

Now, I think, the power to heal the *disease* of leprosy was not in Jesus' touch, since Elisha was able to do the same thing without touching Naaman. But the power of healing the *leper* as a human being was in that touch. Imagine what it would be like to be a leper when all other human beings fled from you the moment they heard your bell. Imagine what it would be like, leprosy or no, if nobody was ever willing to shake your hand, hug you, or kiss you, and everybody turned their heads in disgust every time they saw you. Surely, you would want to be healed, but surely you would want to be healed precisely so that people would touch you and look at you again. That is what it really means to be reintegrated into the human community. No wonder that Naaman was a little peeved when Elisha wouldn't even come out of his house and at least wave his hand over him. So Jesus in touching the leper heals something of that man that can only be healed by touch. Similarly, nearly twelve hundred years later when St. Francis first began searching for holiness, which he defined as loving all things God had made, he forced himself to

kiss a leper on the lips, for he knew if he did not do that, and did not love that man in a way he had not been loved in years, that he, Francis, could not say that he loved what God had made.

Surely, Jesus did well in healing this way for he worked the greatest miracle of all – the healing of a human soul. But there is also a problem here as well. For in healing the leper this way, he also seemed to violate the purity laws of Israel which forbade the touching of any leper. He broke these laws just as surely as he broke the Sabbath laws by healing on the Sabbath and by letting his disciples wander through a field picking ears of grain on the Sabbath. It was a good thing the Pharisees weren't around to witness this miracle, for it would have given them even more ammunition against Jesus than they already had. They would have been appalled.

It seems obvious why he would do this. Why shouldn't he cure someone on the Sabbath if there was a need? Why shouldn't he touch a leper if doing that healed something in the leper that could not be healed in any other way? It simply seems morally superior to do so; it seems morally superior to ignore issues of purity if they stand in the way or even create obstacles to human health. Why not break a law or a tradition if a greater good can come out of it? I suspect that for most of us those are just rhetorical questions, that is to say, given the choice, most of us think one should violate a law in the name of a greater good if the need arises, and that one is more moral for doing so. Our own purity is of less consequence than another's need.

But, I dare say, things are not quite that easy. Purity shouldn't be dismissed so quickly and exceptions made so easily. Let me explain.

Some of you may remember the much acclaimed movie from many years ago, *A Man for All Seasons*. It is the story of Thomas More, who had risen to great power as Chancellor of England under Henry VIII. Unfortunately, when Henry chose to divorce his wife, and then chose to break with the Pope when the Pope refused to go along with Henry's self serving reasons for

the divorce, More was caught in a moral dilemma. He could not and would not go against faith and conscience and condone Henry's act. But by not assenting to Henry's decrees and signing an oath declaring that the divorce was legal he was putting his own life, and the property that his family depended upon in mortal danger. At one point a way seemed open to him if he would only break a law, a law in the situation that seemed unjust. This is, in fact, what his son-in-law Roper advises that he do, since, Roper reasons, laws are made to be broken. But More refuses to do so, and admonishes Roper for even suggesting it. For, he tells him, the law is like a fence between the devil and man that keeps the devil at bay. If one were to discredit the law and break down that fence, then, he argued, what would keep the devil from chasing you from one end of the earth to the other? And More himself knew that if he broke that law, he would lose his own integrity and purity.

The point is that sometimes in a fit of moral enthusiasm, one that we may be fully justified in, we think that purity and law do not matter. All that matters is the consequence. But, as More saw so clearly, the real consequence may be a very different one than we think it will be.

The French philosopher Simone Weil during World War II observed while working for the Resistance that all the subversive activities in which the resistance fighters were engaged were deeply problematic. In order to save lives, one often had to lie as well as make and pass false documents. In order to save lives, one had to become very good at deceit. The problem, Weil noted, was that unfortunately when people did these things, they tended to develop a taste for them and didn't become more honest again when the fighting was all over. A stain had developed on their souls, even if it was in a good cause. A colleague from South Africa gave me another example of this. During the days of apartheid, black South Africans learned how to resist an unjust regime. Often they would withhold taxes and money due to the government.

Unfortunately, after apartheid fell, they still didn't feel like paying taxes and fees even if it was to a black government, and it caused a real financial crisis in all sorts of public institutions, including universities where professors had first taught people to resist apartheid.

The problem is this: goodness sometimes seems to demand that we step outside the law, tradition and purity. And yet when we do so, we often end up sawing off the very branch we need to sit on, for people need law and tradition; they need a sense of purity to give beauty to their actions and they need a sense of wholeness and integrity. They need laws as Thomas More saw in order to defend themselves against evil and excess; they need institutions to live in and that they can respect.

The dilemma has several current examples. In the Presbyterian Church for the last several years a battle has raged over issues of ordination and sexuality. On the one hand, it is argued that it is inherently unfair and unjust to deny ordination to active gays. Many churches have actively ignored, in the name of prophetic justice, the current standards forbidding ordination except to those who are either sexually active only in marriage or who are chaste. On the other hand, there is an argument that the church needs to take seriously the issue of sexual purity for leaders, and the integrity and authority of the Bible and tradition, items which are stronger than they are frequently made out to be. The Presbyterian Church is not the only church to experience the discomfort of balancing itself on the hard horns of this dilemma and that has suffered the piercing results of dissolving one horn and shifting one's weight entirely onto the sharp end of the other. The Episcopal Church, for example, has had a lot of years of bishops claiming exemptions from law and purity in the name of prophetic justice and witness. That church, as everybody knows, is coming apart at the seams as two sides pull away from each other.

Similarly in government and national issues. Since September 11, 2001 we have

considered ourselves at war, and for the last eight years the government has claimed that, in the interests of national security, that it is not good to put to fine a point on things such as the rights of both American citizens and foreigners to an attorney, *habeas corpus* and the right to a trial where they can confront witnesses and evidence. National interest militates against purity of law, it is claimed. And yet, if these things go by the boards in our national life, what, it may well be asked, are we really defending? What integrity and purity do we have?

These seemingly insoluble dilemmas and ones like them are faced daily. But as we face them it is well to look at Christ's example, and to consider one part of his healing of the leper that we often overlook and are probably not at all clear about. Immediately after he heals the leper he tells him to tell no one, "but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Jesus in touching the leper seems to have violated the law and to have violated purity. Yet he has no intention of undoing the Law. As he says elsewhere, he has not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. In this story, he has not only integrated the leper back into human life by healing him, by taking away the disease that keeps him apart from others, and integrated him by touching him back into real personal life with other human beings, he also seeks to reintegrate him into the Law and the traditions of purity by requiring the man to fulfill the law by making an offering for his cleansing. Rather than standing outside as a lone moral gun, making up the rules as he goes along, critical of the Law of purity, Jesus offers healing for the man and for the Law itself. The good thing Jesus has done for the leper is not meant to undo the Law but to pour goodness back into the Law. The Law upholds human life, and Jesus who has acted out of concern for human life is not about to undo it. It is too valuable; real purity and integrity demand that it be taken seriously.

The lesson here is therefore that we are to do what goodness requires – certainly, to heal the sick, to touch the untouchables. But we are also to uphold purity and law, to have integrity, to keep together the institutions on which human life depends, and we are to do it in such a way that they become beautiful and whole. Doing both those things, and not playing one off against the other is not always an easy task; there is certainly no formula for it. We can only do it by an exercise of moral imagination that comes from gazing on the example of the one who did it before us. A real moral life, one with a creative imagination, after all depends more on example than rule. But easy or not, unless we attempt this, unless we learn how to imagine the good life as a whole, and not only in part, we will end up undermining the very things that teach us what is good in the first place.

So, let us then hold to that example of beauty *and* goodness, of purity *and* prophetic justice, knowing that he is more than example; he is also the one who gives his gifts so that our hearts and imaginations may be filled, and so that we, too, may do *all* good.